

Leonov's Garbled Memories  
James Oberg  
Unpublished letter-to-the-editor  
July 22, 1994

It's not just the absence of testimony that can garble a historical event. Sometimes there may be too much testimony of the wrong sort. I sent this long letter off to the NY Times Sunday Magazine on July 22, 1994, regarding what I saw as serious accuracy problems in what was supposed to have been an 'insider account' of early Soviet space history.

The July 17th article on "The Man Who Didn't Walk on the Moon" contains numerous examples of the perils of "oral history" and of accepting as authentic the decades old memories of cosmonauts, journalists, and others, without attempting to check and verify the facts. Aleksey Leonov is a colorful character, a man of great personal courage and narrative creativity, who has been entertaining and charming Western audiences for many years. But the needs of solid scholarship and journalistic integrity should dictate that everyone's memory needs independent verification, and this article is an egregious example of what can go wrong when this step is skipped.

The "assassination" attempt in which Leonov was nearly shot by accident is placed in "the winter of 1967", although it actually occurred in January 1969, only after cosmonaut Beregovoy made his first space mission (October 26-30, 1968) and hence was allowed to appear in public. The event is fully described in my 1981 book, *Red Star in Orbit*, pages 99-100. Beregovoy, contrary to the article's assertion, never became "head of the cosmonaut corps".

The article refers to "the original 8 and 14 new candidates" for cosmonaut training, but for a long time it has been established that exactly twenty men were in the March 1960 selection.

In describing Leonov's 1965 space walk, the article refers to "his co-pilot, Belyayev". Actually, Belyayev was the commander, and Leonov was the co-pilot.

Prior to Leonov's launch, the article states that the Soviets knew that the Americans "were planning a spacewalk with Ed White". This would have required precognition, because prior to the unexpected Russian "space first", the most that was expected on White's mission was a hatch opening and "lean out", and even that was doubtful. Only after the success of Leonov's spacewalk was White given the go-ahead for a full spacewalk of his own.

The notion presented in the article that chief rocket designer Korolev left any significant program decisions at all to any cosmonauts, even Leonov, is preposterous. Korolev decided what would be done, and the cosmonauts (along with everybody else) did it.

The sequence of events for the Voskhod mission (actually called "Voskhod-2") is completely garbled in the article: go into orbit, don spacesuit, close hatch, step into

airlock, acclimatize for fifty minutes, step into open space. What Leonov actually did was get into his spacesuit first, then into the Voskhod for launch into orbit, then open the hatch into the airlock, crawl into the airlock, then close the hatch from the spacecraft, then almost immediately open the outer hatch of his airlock and float out. Contrary to the implications of the article, there was no room in the spacecraft to don or doff the spacesuit. Nor was there any long period of "acclimatization": the spacesuit didn't even carry that much oxygen.

Leonov's claim that it was he (and not the spacecraft commander) who "chose" to land near Perm is also dubious at best. After the automatic system failed on the scheduled landing pass, the ship circled the planet one more time while the crew prepared to control the descent manually. They were still aiming for the original landing point, on the open steppes of central Asia where the recovery forces were waiting. Due to procedural errors they landed far short of their aim point, which is why it took so long to find them.

Decades later, it is understandable that one of the cosmonauts (Belyayev died in 1970) now insists that they had made no mistakes and had landed exactly where they had always intended. But it is not understandable why anybody should believe him, or report the claim as true.

The reported incident where his spacecraft landing cabin remained attached to the orbital equipment module actually happened with Vostok-1 in 1961, and there's never been any previous suggestion that the same thing happened to Voskhod-2 as well. A vast amount of new "inside information" has been published in Moscow, but this kind of incident has only been associated with Vostok-1. Leonov appears to have woven a dramatic strand from another space mission into his own tale of his personal outer space adventures, which certainly is his right as a public figure. But readers have rights, too, and their main right is to accuracy and truth.

Leonov may recall that "as late as 1967, the Soviet Union still had a good chance of beating the Americans to the moon", but it was not because of the alleged feats "already" accomplished by Soviet spacecraft. For example, the "robot rover" was not sent out until 1970, and the automated sample return was still years in the future as well. This chronology is completely scrambled.

Nor did the Russians ever schedule a manned lunar fly-by "in early 1968" specifically "to beat the Apollo- 8 flight". Indeed, they planned manned lunar missions, but the appearance of the Apollo-8 lunar mission in the American schedule caught them (and everyone else) completely by surprise in late 1968.

The main blow to the Soviet lunar program, the death of program "chief designer" Sergey Korolev, did not occur in "May 1966", but in January of that year. "Zond 1" was not a "complete disaster" of a lunar fly-by test in 1967, but had been the designation of a robot interplanetary probe years earlier. The article states that "By 1969, after Apollo-11. . . , the Russians had only one Zond spacecraft left (and) . . . today it sits in a museum in Moscow", but this is false. Two additional unmanned Zond lunarflights were made

AFTER the Apollo-11 landing, whatever other capsules may exist in Moscow museums.

The article incorrectly states that the Soviets "built two versions" of the Saturn-V moon rocket, but they only built one. The article states it "blew up both times it was tested", but it actually was tested FOUR times, all unsuccessfully.

This long string of errors and misstatements suggest that the N.Y. Times took inadequate efforts to perform editorial "fact checking" on this manuscript, which clearly accepted as gospel the personal reminiscences of one colorful character. Assuring "quality control" may be difficult, but other publications seem to manage it and the N.Y. Times has a reputation for succeeding at it as well. This unusual lapse in editorial judgment and responsibility has resulted in significant public misinformation on some aspects of space flight history. The article was indeed correctly labeled "memories", but readers were misled if they assumed that this meant the information was dependably accurate.